

Pesantren and the Political Authority of *Kiai*: The Dialectic of Religion, Power, and Education

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Abstract

Keywords:

Kiai, *Pesantren*,
Local Politics,
Patronage,
Islamic Education.

This study examines the political engagement of *Kiai* in the development of *pesantren* in South Sumatra amid political decentralization and increasing competition among educational institutions. The involvement of *Kiai* in local politics is understood as an adaptive strategy to access public resources and strengthen the institutional capacity of *pesantren*. Although the political roles of *Kiai* have been widely discussed, empirical studies that specifically examine their impact on the structure, quality, and governance of *pesantren* education remain limited. This study aims to analyze how the political practices of *Kiai* influence institutional legitimacy, curriculum development, and the competitiveness of *pesantren*. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach guided by patron-client theory, data were collected from three major *pesantren* in South Sumatra through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The findings indicate that ethical and proportionate political engagement by *Kiai* can accelerate infrastructure development, diversify educational programs, and enhance institutional recognition. However, excessive dependence on political networks poses risks to *pesantren* institutional autonomy and may erode the moral authority of *Kiai* as religious leaders. This study underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between religious leadership and political engagement to ensure that *pesantren* remain credible and sustainable centers of Islamic education.

Abstrak

Kata kunci:

Kiai, *Pesantren*, Politik
Lokal, Patronase,
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Penelitian ini mengkaji keterlibatan politik *Kiai* dalam pengembangan *pesantren* di Sumatera Selatan di tengah desentralisasi politik dan meningkatnya persaingan antar-lembaga pendidikan. Keterlibatan *Kiai* dalam politik lokal dipahami sebagai strategi adaptif untuk mengakses sumber daya publik dan memperkuat kapasitas kelembagaan *pesantren*. Meskipun peran politik *Kiai* telah banyak dibahas, kajian empiris yang secara khusus menelaah dampaknya terhadap struktur, kualitas, dan tata kelola pendidikan *pesantren* masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana praktik politik *Kiai* memengaruhi legitimasi kelembagaan, pengembangan kurikulum, dan daya saing *pesantren*. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif fenomenologis dengan kerangka teori patron-klien. Data dikumpulkan dari tiga *pesantren* besar di Sumatera Selatan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan politik *Kiai* yang dijalankan secara etis dan proporsional dapat mempercepat pembangunan infrastruktur, diversifikasi program pendidikan, dan peningkatan pengakuan institusional *pesantren*. Namun, ketergantungan berlebihan pada jejaring politik berpotensi melemahkan otonomi kelembagaan *pesantren* serta mengikis otoritas moral *Kiai* sebagai pemimpin keagamaan. Penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya menjaga keseimbangan antara peran keagamaan dan keterlibatan politik agar *pesantren* tetap menjadi pusat pendidikan Islam yang kredibel dan berkelanjutan.

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INTRODUCTION

Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) have long been an integral part of Indonesia's historical and sociocultural development. As traditional Islamic educational institutions, *pesantren* are not only centers of religious instruction but also function as agents of social, cultural, and political transformation within local communities (Azizah et al., 2025; Haryanto et al., 2024; Humaidi et al., 2024). At the core of *pesantren* continuity lies the role of the *Kiai*, who serves simultaneously as religious authority, educational leader, and moral reference for society (Dhofier, 2019). In the post-1998 era of political decentralization, *pesantren* increasingly operate within a governance environment shaped by local political configurations, resource competition, and policy negotiations (Kardi et al., 2023; R & Kamil, 2025). This qualitative phenomenon is crucial to examine because it directly affects institutional sustainability, educational governance, and the moral legitimacy of Islamic education in contemporary Indonesia.

In various regions, particularly in South Sumatra Province, the role of *Kiai* has undergone significant transformation. Beyond their spiritual responsibilities, many *Kiai* actively expand *pesantren* infrastructure, establish formal education units, and integrate national curricula within *pesantren* systems. Previous studies have extensively discussed *Kiai* as religious elites, charismatic leaders, and political brokers within Indonesia's democratic landscape (Turmudi, 2006; Hilmy, 2010; Fealy & Bush, 2014; Madkan et al., 2025; Margiansyah et al., 2025; Halomoan et al., 2023). Other scholars emphasize patron-client relations between *Kiai* and santri, highlighting loyalty, charisma, and moral authority as political capital (Scott, 1972; Horikoshi, 1976; Ma'arif et al., 2025; Hamdanah et al., 2025). However, these studies tend to focus on electoral behavior, symbolic authority, or political influence, while giving limited attention to how such political engagement concretely shapes *pesantren* as educational institutions. Consequently, the impact of *Kiai*'s political practices on curriculum development, institutional structure, and educational competitiveness remains underexplored.

The implementation of regional autonomy has opened wider opportunities for civil society actors, including *Kiai*, to engage in local politics and policy-making processes. Given their strong grassroots legitimacy, *Kiai* often utilize political networks to secure access to educational grants, infrastructure development, and government-supported programs (Mietzner, 2009; Subakir, 2018). While existing literature acknowledges this political engagement, it rarely positions *pesantren* as active institutional actors that strategically translate political capital into educational outcomes. Most studies implicitly assume *pesantren* as passive beneficiaries of political power, rather than as organizations managed through deliberate political strategies. This gap highlights the need for research that critically examines the institutional consequences of *Kiai*'s political engagement within the field of Islamic education.

This study is designed to address these shortcomings by analyzing the political engagement of *Kiai* in relation to *pesantren* development in South Sumatra. Unlike previous research that concentrates on political symbolism or religious authority alone, this paper focuses on how political practices influence institutional legitimacy, curriculum orientation, and *pesantren* competitiveness. The purpose of this study is to complement and complete existing scholarship by integrating political analysis with educational institutional analysis, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of *pesantren* governance in decentralized Indonesia (Muchlis Solichin, 2018; Kosim et al., 2023).

This study argues that *Kiai's* political engagement constitutes a double-edged strategy. On the one hand, ethical and proportionate political involvement can accelerate *pesantren* development by improving access to resources, infrastructure, and policy support (Yani et al., 2022). On the other hand, excessive dependence on political patronage risks undermining institutional autonomy and eroding the moral authority of *Kiai* as spiritual leaders (Hannan, 2023; Mumtaz et al., 2024a). Using a phenomenological approach and patron-client theory, this study seeks to demonstrate that the effectiveness of political engagement lies not in political participation itself, but in how such engagement is ethically managed to balance religious authority, institutional independence, and educational progress.

Studies in South Sumatra indicate that *pesantren* led by *Kiai* with strong political networks tend to experience more accelerated institutional development than those without such connections. Several *pesantren* have achieved higher accreditation status, expanded formal education units, and developed *pesantren*-based entrepreneurial initiatives. These patterns suggest that political engagement, when managed ethically and proportionally, can function as an enabling mechanism for strengthening Islamic educational institutions rather than merely serving personal or partisan interests. However, this progress cannot be attributed solely to political access; it also depends on the accumulation of social and symbolic capital that enables *Kiai* to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of both the state and the community.

The moral authority of the *Kiai* plays a decisive role in this process, positioning them as trusted figures not only in religious matters but also in educational leadership. For many *Kiai*, *pesantren* development is perceived as an extension of their dakwah mandate, which is pursued through a combination of cultural and structural strategies. Cultural strategies emphasize the preservation of *pesantren* traditions rooted in sincerity and scholarly authority, while structural strategies involve engagement with policy forums and, in some cases, participation in local political contests. This dual approach reflects a rational institutional strategy to enhance *pesantren* capacity amid increasing competition with modern, state-supported educational institutions (Subakir, 2018).

The political engagement of *Kiai* can therefore be understood as an adaptive response to contemporary governance realities. As state support for religious education is increasingly mediated through political mechanisms, *Kiai* are compelled to navigate political systems to ensure institutional sustainability and relevance. In this context, *Kiai* function simultaneously as spiritual leaders and strategic managers capable of leveraging public policy opportunities (Barizi, 2011; Turmudi, 2006). Nevertheless, a critical challenge remains in safeguarding *pesantren's* moral and spiritual independence. Excessive dependence on political support risks generating ethical vulnerabilities and undermining long-term institutional credibility, underscoring the need for principled leadership and a long-term educational vision (Geertz, 1960).

Building on these dynamics, this study aims to analyze how the political engagement of *Kiai* contributes to *pesantren* development in South Sumatra by examining the practices, motivations, and impacts of political involvement on institutional structure, curriculum orientation, and competitiveness. Employing a phenomenological approach and social construction theory, this article seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of *pesantren* educational dynamics within the constellation of contemporary local politics in Indonesia (Husserl, 2012).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using phenomenological methods to explore the political engagement of *Kiai* in the development of Islamic educational institutions (*pesantren*) in South Sumatra. The primary objective of this approach was to understand the subjective meanings constructed by *Kiai* and local communities regarding their involvement in local politics, particularly as it relates to *pesantren* development. Phenomenology was utilized to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of social actors without imposing prior assumptions or normative judgments. As articulated by Edmund Husserl, phenomenology seeks to uncover the “essence of meaning” underlying social reality through human subjective consciousness (Husserl, 1980)

Fieldwork was conducted in three major *pesantren* in South Sumatra Province: *Pondok Pesantren Al-Ittifaqiah Indralaya*, *Raudhatul Ulum Sakatiga*, and *Qodratullah Langkan*. These *pesantren* were purposively selected due to the active involvement of their *Kiai* in both educational leadership and local political processes. In addition, these institutions demonstrate significant trajectories of institutional development, including infrastructure expansion, diversification of educational programs, and sustained cooperation with local governments, making them relevant and information-rich cases for this study.

Data collection employed three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with *Kiai*, senior teachers (*ustadz*), students (*santri*), *alumni*, and local community figures to capture diverse perspectives on political engagement and institutional development. Participant observation was carried out during religious, social, and political events involving the *Kiai* and *pesantren* to document interactions, practices, and symbolic expressions of authority. Documentation analysis involved institutional archives, annual reports, and administrative records that reflected the growth, governance, and policy engagement of *pesantren*.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interview transcripts, observational notes, and documents were systematically interpreted and reconstructed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and meanings related to political engagement and its implications for *pesantren* development.

To strengthen the analytical framework, this study incorporated patron-client theory as a complementary theoretical lens. This perspective helps explain how relationships between *Kiai* (as patrons) and *santri* or local communities (as clients) shape political orientations, mobilization, and support structures that influence institutional development. In this context, *Kiai* are understood not only as religious authorities but also as political actors who mobilize social loyalty and symbolic capital to access political and economic resources necessary for sustaining *pesantren* (Hilmy, 2010).

James C. Scott’s (1972) analysis of patron-client relations further elucidates this dynamic by emphasizing asymmetrical yet reciprocal exchanges between actors with authority and those who depend on them, legitimized through values such as trust, respect, and loyalty. In the South Sumatran context, these dynamics manifest in the political obedience and support of *santri* and local communities toward the *Kiai*, which are strategically mobilized to strengthen political positioning and resource acquisition for *pesantren* development.

The patron–client framework is further analyzed in conjunction with Berger and Luckmann’s theory of social construction, which conceptualizes social reality as being formed through processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). Within *pesantren*, patronage relations are not only enacted through social interactions but also institutionalized through hierarchical structures, traditions of reverence, and forms of spiritual loyalty that reinforce the authority of the *Kiai*.

By integrating phenomenological inquiry with patron–client theory and social constructionism, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of how the political practices of *Kiai* influence the development and consolidation of *pesantren* as educational institutions. This includes structural dimensions such as funding access, public policy engagement, and political networks, as well as cultural dimensions encompassing legitimacy, charisma, and relational dynamics within *pesantren* communities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings of this study were obtained through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis conducted intensively in the field. The results indicate that the political engagement of *Kiai* is understood as a subjective experience rooted in institutional awareness of the *pesantren*, rather than as an effort to pursue personal political power. Based on interview data, *Kiai* conceptualize politics as a *wasilah* (instrumental means) to ensure the sustainability of *pesantren* and to secure access to public policy processes in the field of Islamic education. One *Kiai*, who serves as the leader of a *pesantren* in Ogan Ilir Regency, stated that without access to policymakers, *pesantren* risk being marginalized within the national education system; therefore, such engagement is directed entirely toward the interests of the students and the institution (K1, interview, 12 June 2024). Field observations further reveal that *Kiai*’s participation in official local government forums primarily focuses on articulating institutional aspirations of *pesantren*, particularly in relation to the development of educational facilities and the strengthening of institutional legal status, rather than involvement in practical or partisan political activities.

Another significant finding highlights the existence of a distinctive patronage relationship among *Kiai*, students (*santri*), and alumni within the context of political engagement. This relationship is neither coercive nor transactional; instead, it is constructed through symbolic, cultural, and spiritual bonds deeply embedded in *pesantren* traditions. An alumnus who currently serves as a teacher explained that compliance with *Kiai*’s directives is grounded in the belief that the *Kiai* acts in the best interests of the *pesantren* and the wider Muslim community, rather than for personal gain (A1, interview, 25 June 2024). Observations of large-scale religious gatherings and alumni meetings at a *pesantren* in Banyuasin demonstrate that *pesantren* function as spaces for social consolidation, where prevailing discourses predominantly address issues of institutional development, enhancement of educational quality for *santri*, and responses to public policies concerning religious education.

The study also reveals that *Kiai*’s political engagement has contributed to increased access to governmental resources for *pesantren*. This finding is supported not only by interview data but also by documentary evidence. A *pesantren* administrative officer noted that the *Kiai*’s networks with policymakers significantly facilitated the acceleration of proposal submissions and the realization of educational assistance (U1,

interview, 2 July 2024). Documentary analysis conducted at Pondok *Pesantren Al-Ittifaqiah Indralaya* identified various official records, including grant proposals for the construction of classrooms and student dormitories, reports on teacher competency enhancement programs funded by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and legal documents related to formal education units under the *pesantren's* administration. The *Pesantren* Annual Report explicitly states that cooperation with local governments and the Ministry of Religious Affairs has been a critical factor in accelerating the development of educational infrastructure.

Nevertheless, interview findings also reveal variations in perceptions regarding the impact of political engagement on the moral legitimacy of *Kiai*. Some informants argue that such involvement strengthens the position of *pesantren* in the eyes of both the state and society, provided that *Kiai* maintain ethical conduct and clear boundaries from practical politics. A senior *santri* emphasized that trust in the *Kiai* remains intact as long as he upholds proper conduct and avoids excessive political involvement (S2, interview, 5 July 2024). Conversely, other informants expressed concerns that overly intense proximity to practical politics may blur the moral role of the *Kiai* and risk positioning *pesantren* as instruments of particular political interests (U3, interview, 7 July 2024). Field observations suggest that *Kiai* who maintain a symbolic distance from practical politics tend to be more stable in preserving the trust of the *pesantren* community.

In addition, the study identifies adaptive strategies employed by *Kiai* in developing *pesantren* through the integration of traditional *pesantren* scholarship with modern educational systems. This is reflected in curriculum documents and organizational structures that demonstrate alignment between *pesantren* curricula and national education standards, the involvement of highly educated alumni as teaching staff, and the development of flagship programs such as Qur'anic memorization (*tahfidz al-Qur'an*), foreign language proficiency, and *santri* entrepreneurship. A madrasah administrator noted that the *Kiai* consistently emphasizes the importance of *pesantren* autonomy and modernization without undermining the spiritual values that form the foundation of *pesantren* education (U4, interview, 10 July 2024). Overall, these findings underscore that the political engagement of *Kiai* constitutes an integral part of an institutional strategy aligned with the broader vision of *pesantren* educational development.

Discussion

Kiai and Politics as a Strategy for Educational Institutional Development

The findings of this study indicate that the political involvement of *Kiai* in South Sumatra is not merely an expression of personal ambition for power, but rather a strategic maneuver to accelerate the development of the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) they lead. This is evident in their systematic efforts to establish relationships with local governments, legislative bodies, and development partners. For instance, several *pesantren* led by politically affiliated or connected *Kiai*, such as Pondok *Pesantren Al-Ittifaqiah Indralaya*, successfully secured grant funding from provincial and district governments. These funds were used for the construction of madrasah buildings, student dormitories, and educational laboratories. Such political engagement reflects the pragmatic orientation of *Kiai*, who leverage formal political channels to pursue broader educational goals (Hidayatullah et al., 2022).

This success is inseparable from the *Kiai's* strategic position as both a trusted community figure and a moral authority. Within the *pesantren* educational system, the

Kiai holds the highest authority in determining the direction and policies of the institution, including infrastructure development and educational programming (El-Yunusi et al., 2025; Noor et al., 2023). In this capacity, *Kiai* are able to negotiate with political actors without compromising their social legitimacy. In fact, their political involvement is often perceived as a form of advocacy for the interests of the *ummah* (Muslim community) through formal political structures. This unique position allows *Kiai* to act as mediators between public interests and governmental policies, particularly in the field of Islamic education.

In several cases, *Kiai* who participate in local political contests do not merely promote personal agendas but position the development of *pesantren* as a core priority in their political vision. This political orientation reflects a combination of pragmatism and idealism rooted in Islamic ethics (Samson, 1968; Yani et al., 2022). By utilizing political positions, *Kiai* not only gain access to governmental resources but also exert influence over broader educational policy. Such strategies enable *pesantren* to evolve not only as traditional religious institutions but also as dynamic entities capable of adapting to the demands of modernization and national development.

This phenomenon is consistent with the findings of Ahmad (2021), who asserts that the transformation of modern *pesantren* is often driven by the political maneuvering of their leaders. The political involvement of *Kiai* can be understood as a form of state *pesantren* linkage, wherein mutualistic relationships are established between religious elites and local governments to advance Islamic education agendas at the local level (Kingsley, 2018; Mietzner, 2009). This relationship creates a mutually beneficial dynamic, where the state gains religious legitimacy for its development programs, while *pesantren* secure material and policy support for institutional growth. This pattern demonstrates the evolving role of *pesantren* from relatively isolated educational institutions to key actors in national educational development where *Kiai* function not only as spiritual leaders but also as agents of social and political transformation.

The Patronage Pattern of *Kiai* in Mobilizing Educational Support

The relationship between *Kiai* and the *pesantren* community in South Sumatra is strongly influenced by the patron-client mechanism deeply rooted in Indonesia's socio-religious traditions. The *Kiai* act as patrons who provide religious knowledge, political access, and educational facilities, while *santri* (students), *alumni*, and the broader community reciprocate with loyalty and strong social support. In this context, the charismatic symbolism of the *Kiai* manifested through perceived sanctity and religious scholarship serves as a legitimizing tool to consolidate authority and influence, particularly in advocating for educational policy. This charismatic authority becomes a foundational asset that enables *Kiai* to mobilize community support across various domains, including the development of educational infrastructure and participation in political arenas.

Patronage is an asymmetrical but reciprocal social relationship legitimized by cultural norms. In the *pesantren* context, this relationship is reinforced by deep religious and spiritual bonds. Legitimacy is further strengthened through the concept of *barakah* (blessing), which is believed to flow from the *Kiai* to their *santri*, establishing an emotional and spiritual attachment that surpasses the ordinary teacher-student dynamic. *Santri* who feel indebted to the *Kiai* are more likely to support all initiatives including political involvement in the hope that institutional progress will contribute to collective welfare. This phenomenon explains why *pesantren* often serve as effective and organized mass mobilization bases during local political contests.

This patronage pattern facilitates substantial political mobilization due to the widespread alumni and *santri* networks embedded across various societal sectors. *Kiai* leverage their traditional authority to shape the political preferences of *pesantren* communities, which can in turn influence local election outcomes and educational policymaking. Within this dynamic, *pesantren* function not merely as educational institutions but also as political power bases capable of being mobilized for institutional advancement. This illustrates how religious authority can be transformed into effective political capital within Indonesia's local democratic system.

However, the patron-client relationship does not always yield long-term positive outcomes. Some scholars argue that the loyalty cultivated within this system often results in structural dependency, which hampers the institutional autonomy of *pesantren*. In the long term, *pesantren* that rely too heavily on the personal authority of the *Kiai* and specific political affiliations may struggle to adapt when power constellations shift or leadership transitions occur. This dilemma highlights the need for a balance between utilizing charismatic authority for institutional development and building a more structured and independent governance system. This challenge becomes increasingly relevant in the context of Islamic education modernization, which demands greater accountability and transparency in institutional management.

Access to Political and Governmental Resources

Kiai with broader political networks have demonstrated the ability to secure substantial development assistance from various levels of government, ranging from local administrations and ministries to legislative representatives. Such assistance is utilized not only for physical infrastructure development such as school buildings and dormitories but also for strategic programs including teacher training, scholarship provision, school accreditation enhancement under *pesantren* management, and curriculum development aligned with national standards (Muchlis Solichin, 2018). This capacity illustrates that the *Kiai's* charismatic authority can be transformed into effective political capital for accessing public resources (Yani et al., 2022). Within Indonesia's decentralized education system, access to political resources serves as a critical factor for the sustainable institutional development of *pesantren*.

However, this reality also entails complex political consequences and potential moral dilemmas. Some *Kiai* are compelled to engage in political reciprocation, such as supporting regional election candidates or promoting specific political figures through the *pesantren* networks they oversee. In the long term, such practices can lead to moral tension and pose risks to the independence of *pesantren* education if not guided by sound ethical-political principles. The involvement of religious leaders in practical politics risks diminishing their moral and religious authority unless accompanied by a consistent public commitment (Mumtaz et al., 2024b; Rahman, 2020; Rofiq, 2025). This phenomenon highlights the tension between the pragmatic need for resource access and the moral imperative to maintain institutional independence (Dian et al., 2024).

In response to these challenges, some *Kiai* strive to navigate this dilemma by positioning themselves as constructive yet critical partners of the government. They leverage formal relationships to gain access to development resources while maintaining political neutrality, thereby preventing *pesantren* from being reduced to mere instruments of political campaigns. This approach reflects a form of political wisdom aimed at strengthening education and empowering the Muslim community, rather than accumulating personal political power (Maarif et al., 2025). It enables *Kiai* to preserve their moral authority while continuing to contribute to national education development through collaborative engagement with government institutions.

The dynamics of accessing political resources carry long-term implications for the sustainability and institutional autonomy of *pesantren*. On the one hand, such access facilitates rapid infrastructure development and educational quality improvement. On the other hand, overdependence on political resources may threaten the *pesantren*'s independence and institutional integrity (Mun'im Amaly et al., 2020). The primary challenge lies in developing a balanced partnership model between *pesantren* and the state—one in which political support does not compromise the fundamental values and educational autonomy of the *pesantren*. This calls for the establishment of a more mature governance framework in managing political-educational relations, enabling *pesantren* to uphold their identity and educational mission while contributing meaningfully to national development (Kosim et al., 2023).

The Political Impact on the Legitimacy and Educational Authority of *Pesantren*

The political involvement of *Kiai* has an ambivalent impact on their legitimacy as leaders of *pesantren* and as authorities in Islamic education (Mumtaz et al., 2024a). On one hand, political engagement expands their social influence and provides access to resources that significantly support the development of *pesantren* education. On the other hand, it may blur the boundary between educational interests and political power, particularly when the *Kiai*'s political affiliations diverge from the preferences of their communities or students (Cipta, 2023). Within the framework of charismatic leadership, *Kiai*'s legitimacy is derived not only from intellectual and spiritual capacity but also from consistent moral conduct in all aspects of life, including political engagement (Kartiko et al., 2025; Sahari et al., 2025; Siregar, 2013). This tension creates a fundamental dilemma between utilizing political capital for institutional advancement and maintaining moral integrity as a religious leader.

Several *Kiai* experienced diminished authority when they became overly aligned with political power, especially when public integrity was compromised (Hannan, 2023). This is further exacerbated by polarization among *santri* and *pesantren* communities, particularly when the *Kiai*'s political affiliations conflict with the political preferences of their followers (Wadipalapa & Budiatri, 2025). At this point, religious symbolism the core of the *Kiai*'s authority risks being reduced to a mere tool for political mobilization (Chalik, 2025). This phenomenon demonstrates that the *Kiai*'s charismatic authority is deeply contingent upon the community's perception of the purity of intention and the consistency of values they uphold. When political pragmatism begins to dominate, their credibility as spiritual leaders may gradually erode (Fealy & Bush, 2014).

Horikoshi (1976) also emphasized that the *Kiai*'s charismatic symbolism can only be sustained if accompanied by symbolic distance from practical politics. In the traditional social structure of *pesantren*, legitimacy is not merely built through proximity to power, but through sustained moral consistency and spiritual depth (Mustikamah et al., 2025; Salamah et al., 2025). The concept of "symbolic distance" refers to the *Kiai*'s ability to engage in politics without relinquishing the sacred aura and moral authority that underpin their leadership (Ahyani et al., 2024; Faisal et al., 2022). Contemporary studies suggest that *Kiai* who successfully maintain legitimacy are those who position themselves as guardians of values rather than political actors seeking power.

In facing the challenges of modernity and democratization, *Kiai* have developed various strategies to maintain their educational authority while remaining politically relevant. These strategies include forming cross-party coalitions to avoid partisan stigmas, focusing on education and community welfare as their political platforms, and

ensuring transparency in the use of political resources for the benefit of the *pesantren* (Muchlis Solichin, 2018). These adaptive strategies reflect an intelligent response to the evolving political landscape of Indonesia while preserving the essence of charismatic leadership that defines the *pesantren* tradition. The success of this legitimacy preservation will determine the sustainability of *pesantren* as independent educational institutions that also contribute meaningfully to national development (Aisyah et al., 2022).

Adaptive Strategies of *Kiai* in Advancing Modern Islamic Education

Kiai in South Sumatra have demonstrated a moderate, progressive, and adaptive orientation in developing contemporary Islamic educational institutions. Their transformational leadership is reflected in their ability to integrate classical *pesantren* traditions with modern educational systems that are responsive to evolving social dynamics (Machmudi, 2021). The educational models developed not only merge traditional learning methods such as *sorogan* and *bandongan* with the national curriculum but also synthesize pedagogical approaches that preserve Islamic identity while accommodating the demands of modernity (Zarkasyi, 2020). The establishment of formal education units ranging from *Raudhatul Athfal* to senior high schools, along with flagship programs in Qur'anic memorization and Arabic-English language proficiency, reflects a holistic vision in constructing a comprehensive educational ecosystem.

The modernization strategies undertaken by these *Kiai* represent a paradigmatic shift from traditional authority models to visionary, collaborative leadership. Strategically involving alumni and professionals from both domestic and international institutions, they strengthen institutional capacity while also building international academic networks, such as through student exchange programs to the Middle East (Armila & Sopianingsih, 2022). The recruitment of *alumni* with master's and doctoral degrees to manage educational institutions indicates a growing awareness of the importance of professionalism in the governance of modern Islamic education. This approach not only improves educational quality but also enhances the legitimacy of *pesantren* as globally competitive learning institutions.

The adaptability demonstrated by *Kiai* in responding to social change aligns with international research findings on the resilience of Islamic educational institutions. *Pesantren* that develop integrated systems between traditional and modern education have proven more capable of surviving and thriving amid contemporary challenges (Hanafi et al., 2021). Their ability to engage in cultural negotiation between traditional values and modernity reflects intellectual maturity in addressing the complexities of Islamic education in the age of globalization. This adaptive leadership model underscores that the authority of the *Kiai* is not static but dynamic and responsive to the demands of the times.

The modernization of *pesantren* under the leadership of *Kiai* in South Sumatra illustrates the evolution of religious leadership from merely holding spiritual authority to becoming visionary and transformative educational actors. *Kiai* retain the authority to determine educational direction, objectives, and curricula; yet in the modern context, this authority is exercised through participatory and inclusive approaches (Muchlis Solichin, 2018). The locally grounded but globally oriented Islamic education model they have developed contributes significantly to the discourse on Islamic educational modernization in Indonesia. These adaptive strategies not only sustain the relevance of *pesantren* within the national educational landscape but also reinforce their position as dynamic and progressive centers of Islamic civilization.

Critical Theoretical Positioning and Scholarly Contribution

The findings of this study contribute to ongoing theoretical debates on the nexus between religious authority, political power, and educational institutional development by extending patron–client theory beyond its conventional application in electoral and elite politics. While classical patron–client scholarship primarily frames patronage as a mechanism of political mobilization and loyalty exchange (Scott, 1972; Horikoshi, 1976), this study demonstrates that within the context of *pesantren*, patronage operates as an institutional governance strategy that directly shapes educational structures, curriculum orientation, and organizational sustainability. This finding challenges dominant assumptions in prior studies that portray *pesantren* as passive beneficiaries of political patronage, instead positioning them as strategic institutional actors capable of translating symbolic and political capital into tangible educational outcomes.

From the perspective of Weberian authority, the political engagement of *Kiai* identified in this study reflects a hybridization of charismatic and rational–legal authority. Contrary to arguments that emphasize the erosion of traditional religious authority under democratic and bureaucratic pressures ((Fealy & Bush, 2014), the findings indicate that charismatic authority can be institutionally stabilized when embedded within formal policy networks and educational governance frameworks. In this sense, *Kiai* do not merely adapt to political systems but actively reconfigure political engagement as an extension of educational leadership, thereby maintaining legitimacy while enhancing institutional capacity.

Furthermore, drawing on Berger and Luckmann’s theory of social construction, the study shows that the political practices of *Kiai* are socially legitimized through processes of internalization within *pesantren* communities. Political engagement is not perceived as a deviation from religious norms but is constructed as a moral responsibility to safeguard and advance *pesantren* institutions. This finding refines existing critiques that associate political proximity with moral decline (Hannan, 2023) by demonstrating that legitimacy erosion is not inevitable, but contingent upon ethical proportionality and the maintenance of symbolic distance from partisan politics.

Comparatively, while much of the literature on Islamic education policy emphasizes state dominance and regulatory control over religious institutions (Kosim et al., 2023; Mumtaz et al., 2024a), this study reveals a more negotiated and reciprocal relationship. *Pesantren* emerge as active participants in policy formation and implementation through the political agency of *Kiai*, particularly in decentralized governance contexts. This insight advances the literature by bridging political sociology and Islamic education studies, highlighting how religious educational institutions exercise bounded political autonomy without abandoning their normative foundations.

At the same time, the findings problematize instrumentalist interpretations of political engagement. Although political access accelerates institutional development, excessive dependence on political patronage risks transforming charismatic authority into transactional legitimacy, thereby undermining long-term institutional resilience. This tension supports recent empirical findings on the fragility of religious authority when deeply entangled with partisan politics (Wadipalapa & Budiatri, 2025), while also offering a corrective framework that identifies ethical moderation as a key mediating variable.

Overall, this study contributes theoretically by conceptualizing the political engagement of *Kiai* as an ethically mediated institutional strategy rather than a deviation from religious leadership or a purely pragmatic pursuit of power. By grounding this argument in phenomenological field data, the study extends patron-client theory, enriches debates on religious authority in democratic settings, and offers an integrative framework for understanding *pesantren* governance in contemporary Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals the surprising finding that the political involvement of *Kiai* in South Sumatra is not merely an expression of personal power ambition, but rather a structured and visionary adaptive strategy to accelerate the development of *pesantren* institutions. The fact that the physical progress, curriculum, and accreditation of *pesantren* are strongly influenced by *Kiai's* political affiliations and networks—something that cannot be known by simply observing the development of *pesantren* from the outside—is a finding that can only be understood in depth after field research is conducted. This finding shows that political relations, if managed ethically, can actually be an accelerator of *pesantren* strengthening.

Scientifically, this research makes an important contribution by presenting a new perspective on the relationship between religious charisma and political capital in the context of local Islamic education. This paper not only confirms previous findings on the dual role of *Kiai* as religious and social leaders, but also challenges claims of neutrality of religious institutions that have been assumed to be separate from practical political dynamics. Using a phenomenological approach and patron-client theory, this study enriches the study of Islamic education by showing the complexity of interactions between religion, power, and educational institutions, while introducing an integrative model between *Kiai's* spiritual authority and managerial vision.

However, this study has several limitations. The focus on only three large *pesantren* in South Sumatra limits the generalization of the findings to other regions that have different socio-political dynamics and *pesantren* culture. The variation of *pesantren* education levels was not explored extensively, and the gender and age aspects of key actors did not become the main variables in the analysis. In addition, the limitations of descriptive-qualitative methods without the involvement of quantitative approaches cause the depth of data to be more interpretative than representative. Therefore, further research with broader location coverage, mixed methodological approaches, and involving more samples and case variations is urgently needed to provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding. Broader and more robust findings will provide a strong basis for the formulation of contextualized, equitable and sustainable Islamic education policies.

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